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THE CHRISTIAN SANCTION OF WAR

Address at the Service of Intercession for the King's Naval and Military Forces, held in Canterbury Cathedral: August 9th 1914

BY

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THE CHRISTIAN SANCTION OF WAR.

We are assembled here this afternoon, at the call of our King in Council and of our Archbishop, for the purpose of solemn intercession with Almighty God on behalf of His Majesty's naval and military forces now engaged in war. That is in accordance with the solemn practice of our fathers at all the great crises of our history; and it is only about fourteen years since we were similarly interceding with Almighty God in this cathedral, when the King's forces were engaged in an arduous struggle in South Africa.

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But the gravity of our present struggle is greater than that of any in the memory of

living men, perhaps greater than that of any other in our history. The very existence of our Empire, and even the independence of our Kingdom, is at stake; and the Power by which we are threatened has been, of late years, deemed the greatest military force in Europe, and a naval force only second to our own. It may be that the capacities and resources of our Kingdom and Empire will be strained as they have never been strained before; and that all our manhood, and even our womanhood, will be called upon for all the force and endurance of which they are capable.

Prayer to God is incumbent upon us at all times; but there are special reasons why, in a great war, it is the most important of all duties, and the most precious of all privileges. The issues of war are, in an extraordinary degree, beyond the control of man. It is a striking fact that some of the greatest commanders and conquerors—men like Cæsar, Marlborough, and even Napoleon—have exhibited a profound apprehension that the issue of their battles and campaigns really depended upon some Superior Power, how-

ever able and careful their dispositions had been, and however powerful their forces. The issue of a battle or a campaign may, in fact, be determined by incidents, moral and physical, which no human power can foresee or control. Our own deliverance from the Spanish Armada was certainly determined, in an incalculable degree, by the tremendous storm which wrecked the Spanish fleet at the critical moment; and again and again in history have great battles been decided by influences of that nature, or by some unaccountable turn in the feeling and temper of an army.

Consequently, when nations go to war, they place themselves and their fortunes in the hands of God in a more absolute manner than in any other human affair. That is what we have now done by declaring war against Germany; and we have, therefore, more reason than at any other time—more reason, perhaps, than at any other time in our history—to fall before God's footstool, and to implore Him for the protection and blessing which He, and He only, can give us. It is still more true now than in the

Psalmist's time that "there is no king that can be saved by the multitude of an host, neither is any mighty man delivered by much strength; a horse is counted but a vain thing to save a man, neither shall he deliver any man by his great strength. Behold, the eye of the Lord is upon them that fear Him, and upon them that put their trust in His mercy." In that spirit we now bow before His throne—in the words of our daily prayer in time of war and tumult, before the throne of "the only Giver of all victory."

Coming before Him in these solemn circumstances, with this momentous petition, it becomes us to ask ourselves whether we are doing so in a spirit, and with a cause, on which we can expect His blessing, and a favourable answer to our prayers. "If I incline unto wickedness with my heart," says the Psalmist, "the Lord will not hear me." If we are to offer our prayers with a believing and confident heart, we must have our conscience clear; and before men ask God's blessing in so tremendous an issue as that of war, they must consider with the

most solemn earnestness whether they can feel assured that what they are doing and asking is in accordance with His will.

As to the question of the lawfulness of war itself, though some good Christian minds are troubled by the question, the answer seems clear and simple. War is justifiable for the same reason that it is lawful to put men to death for great crimes, like murder and treason. The conscience of mankind at large, the conscience of Christian States at large, has uniformly wielded the sword of justice in avenging and averting, by the punishment of death, such crimes of violence and treachery as destroy the very frame of Society. That use of the sword of justice, moreover, has the express support of Revelation, for St. Paul has declared that the ruler "beareth not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of God, an avenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil."

But if it is lawful to use the sword of justice against individuals, it must be equally lawful to use it against a community of individuals—in other words, against a society, or a nation, who are unjustly destroying

or threatening the lives and the peace of another society or nation. The use of the sword—which is an elementary name for war—has been shown by thousands of years of experience to be, in the last resort, the only effectual means of punishing and preventing unjust violence. It is vain to argue what might be possible or desirable if man were an uncorrupt creature. He is, as a matter of fact, a sinful creature; and, as St. Paul plainly says, it is God Himself who has put the sword into the hands of human authority, to punish, and to restrain, the effects of that sinfulness.

Thus the mere fact of our resort to the sword need not of itself burden our consciences. But if this account of its awful purpose be true, one indispensable condition for its use is obviously requisite. If the purpose of the sword is to punish injustice, then we must take care that it is used for that solemn purpose only. It was not given to men to enable them to gratify their ambition or pride, or to enlarge their kingdoms at their pleasure, or for any selfish purpose whatever. He who draws the sword of

war for any purpose but that of upholding justice and judgment on the earth, is committing the crime of murder on the vastest scale, and renders himself justly liable to the stern use of that sword against himself. If, therefore, we are to come before God with a clear conscience at this moment, we must be able to say, from our hearts, that we have not now drawn the sword from any selfish motive, or under the influence of any violent passion, but that we have drawn it simply and solely in the discharge of our bounden duty, and in fulfilment of just promises and engagements to our neighbours.

My brethren, I believe it may be confidently asserted that this country has never been engaged in a war in respect to which this could be said with more unqualified confidence than in the present case. I think, indeed, we may thankfully consider, in reviewing our long history, that the wars by which our Empire has been developed and established have, on the whole, been of this character, and have not been prompted by either national or dynastic ambition. The wars under Queen Elizabeth, in which

the germs of our Empire were laid, were mainly prompted by a just indignation against the cruel and superstitious tyranny of Spain; and the wars of Marlborough and Wellington were similarly fought to protect Europe against an overbearing and unjust domination. In the heat of those struggles we may have been betrayed, in some instances, into an unjust use of the sword; but, on the whole, we may thank God that the wars which have established Great Britain in its present position have been—at least mainly—fought in just causes. Especially in our later history, if we have erred, as human beings can hardly avoid erring sometimes, the errors have been due to a failure of judgment, and not of motive or intention.

Certainly in the present instance we have no other motive or object. We covet no other nation's possessions; we have not interfered, and do not desire to interfere, with any other nation's affairs; we would not willingly exert our influence for any other purpose but that of promoting righteousness and freedom. As to the particular occasion of this war, we have offer-

ed no provocation whatever, except what has been called "the strong antipathy" of right to wrong; the provocation which adherence to promises and treaties must ever offer to those who would break them; the provocation which defence of the weak must ever offer to those who would overbear them. We can say, in a word, with a good conscience, that we are at least earnestly endeavouring to act as the servants of Him of Whom the Psalmist exclaims: "The Lord is King; the earth may be glad thereof; yea, the multitude of the isles may be glad thereof. Clouds and darkness are round about Him; righteousness and judgment are the habitation of His seat." It is in the cause of that righteousness and judgment that we desire to act.

But there is one other condition that we must fulfil, if we are to dare to claim the favour of God in this great struggle. We must not only ask whether we are upholding righteousness in our public action, but whether we are observing it in our own hearts, and in our national life. Sufferings, we are told in our Prayer Book, may be sent

"to correct and amend in us whatsoever doth offend the eyes of our Heavenly Father." Can we fail to be sensible that there is much in our lives, both private and public, which must offend His eyes? Our private sins must be left to our private consciences. But who has not listened during the last few years, with a painful sense of their justice, to reproaches among ourselves at the luxury, the extravagance, the reckless pursuit of pleasure, the general self-indulgence, which have been too prevalent among us? With what heart can men appeal for God's favour and protection in their hour of need, who, in their hours of well-being, have disregarded His Name and worship, and neglected His Word and Sacraments? Before going into battle, as a nation and as individuals, let us seek His absolution in that comprehensive prayer of our Litany "that it would please Him to give us true repentance, to forgive us all our sins, negligences, and ignorances, and to endue us with the grace of His Holy Spirit to amend our lives according to His Holy Word."

In so far, my brethren, as we approach

Him in this spirit, we may humbly hope for His blessing on the bravery and the self-sacrifice of our soldiers and sailors. Those sacrifices, moreover, alike for them and for ourselves, will be relieved of their worst bitterness, and will be glorified by a sacred and Divine example. They will not be fruitless sacrifices. They will be sacrifices which will win for the fellow-countrymen of those who offer them, and for the world at large, grand additions to that edifice of righteousness and judgment, of Christian civilization, towards which the hopes of mankind are directed with an inexpressible yearning. If this war results, as we here pray that it may, in the reassertion of principles which were in danger of being forgotten or overridden, in the re-establishment of the faith of treaties, and in the protection of the weak against the strong, it will have secured for Europe and the world a great consolidation and advance in the essential principles of national truth and justice.

It is a comparatively poor thing to die for glory, or for power and wealth; but it is a grand thing to die for righteousness and

equity, for the God who allows us to be His instruments in upholding them, and for the King and country whose call we are proud to obey. If, moreover, men go to war in tnis spirit, they may claim a still more Divine privilege. In the sacrifice which soldiers make in a righteous cause, they are following, in the most essential characteristic, the "author and finisher of our Faith," "the Captain of our Salvation," whose work is summed up in that soldier-like phrase, "He resisted unto blood, striving against sin." The soldier who sheds his blood on the battlefield in a righteous cause, and with a righteous purpose, is doing the very thing that Christ did, and he may be assured of Christ's approval and blessing.

In quiet times we may fail to realise adequately the solemn truth that, whenever we receive the Holy Communion, we are receiving spiritual benefits which were won for us by the Sacrifice of the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ. If war, in one aspect, is a horrible thing, so was the Cross; but the whole hope of the salvation of mankind, here and hereafter, was won by

that Divine bloodshed; and its grace and glory are reflected over every battlefield in which blood is shed in the long struggle against unrighteousness. In these convictions, and with these solemn resolves, let us now appeal to God, in firm and humble faith, for His help in this hour of need; and let us enter into this dread conflict with the full assurance that "God is our hope and strength, a very present help in trouble."

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